Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan

Swinging With Native Vines

Vines are one of nature's greatest gifts to gardeners. They can cover ugly fences and utility poles, camouflage storage sheds, or bring color, fragrance, and panache to trellises and arbors. Vines fit into almost any available space, whether spilling out of a balcony window box, climbing up the front of a town house, or running free like a ground cover. It is too bad gardeners seldom think to use vines, or else plant the wrong ones by mistake.

There are hundreds of vines and climbers from which to choose. Traditional ornamental favorites include perennials like climbing roses, clematis, and numerous grape varieties; while fast-growing annuals such as sweet peas, morning glories, moonflowers, or climbing nasturtiums have a popular following, especially for porches and trellises.

Unfortunately, there are some real thugs being planted in gardens. These invasive vines, usually exotic species, can easily overrun a garden. Some of the best known invasives are kudzu, the "vine that ate the South," multiflora rose, English ivy, and oriental bittersweet. These noxious vines gobble up yards, forests, and farmland, pushing out our friendly natives. In addition, watch out for porcelain berry, Japanese honeysuckle, and both Chinese and Japanese wisteria, which are still being promoted and sold by mail-order catalog.

Native vines provide the perfect and preferred alternative to these aggressive invaders, and often provide more desirable qualities than their exotic cousins. For example, while wisteria adds a rich, fragrant, and distinctive quality to a home when trained along fence tops, railings, or atop arbors, you can avoid the frost-sensitive Asian varieties and plant American wisteria (*Wisteria frutescens*) instead. The native wisteria has lavender or mauve flowers which not only bloom in late spring, but often will bloom again in September, and usually flower the year after the vines are planted; Asian wisteria can take years and heavy pruning before blooming.

Or consider Japanese honeysuckle. The aroma is intoxicating, but the vines will quickly overwhelm any garden area and continue to strangle vegetation far afield. In fact, gardeners should make a point of eradicating this vine wherever it appears — although perhaps not on

someone else's property. Native coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*), is a dazzling substitute which twines like the Japanese variety, and offers a rich array of yellowish-red and orange blossoms for about two months during the summer. Coral honeysuckle's deep floral throat offers a welcome mat for hummingbirds and butterflies, and the red berries which follow are prized by birds.

Oriental and Chinese bittersweet are both colorful invaders to be avoided — and eradicated — while American bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*) is ideally suited for fence coverage, stout trellises, and even as a ground cover. Native bittersweet is prized more for its brilliant reddish-orange fruits and golden fall foliage than for its flowers, but a snow-covered winter garden comes alive when the vine's bright red seeds attract the attention of hungry birds. Note that bittersweet is dioecious: there are male and female plants, and to produce the desired fruits you must plant at least one male vine in addition to female vines.

In addition to the sometimes staggering beauty of ornamental clematis, there are two native clematis species worth noting. Leather flower (*Clematis viorna*), is a reddish, bell-shaped flower which can be trained onto a mailbox post, or allowed to amble free as a ground cover. Virgins bower (*Clematis virginiana*), a late-summer bloomer, almost explodes into heavily-laden panicles of small white flowers. A bit rambling in form, virgins bower works well in gardens seeking a wild or natural look.

Trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*) is as loud and bold as its name. From summer through fall, the vine's intense scarlet, trumpet-shaped blooms stand out along agricultural fencerows, with vines which clamber up cedar trees or creep across rock faces. The flowers delight children - and hummingbirds - but should not be used in smaller spaces. This vine needs either support or space to spread out, which also qualifies it as a wonderful ground cover.

Like kudzu, English ivy has a ravenous appetite and has often devoured yards and natural areas throughout the East and Midwest. A more suitable and colorful alternative is Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*), which has inspired the name of a railroad line, found praise from conservationists using it for erosion control, and by gardeners enraptured by its crimson-purple autumn foliage. The Scone Palace, ancient crowning site for the kings of Scotland, is perhaps more memorable for the imported Virginia creeper covering its walls and battlements than any other visual feature. Virginia creeper can serve as a ground cover in sunny areas, or cover fences and walls. It will also produce clusters of purple berries delectable to birds.

Crossvine (*Bignonia capreolata*) is one of the toughest and most versatile native vines. It functions as a ground cover, climbs with ease using twining tendrils, and endures the toughest environmental conditions. It features two-inch long, trumpet-shaped flowers reminiscent of trumpet vine, which bloom in spring and feature a scarlet-orange exterior, and yellowish-red throat, attractant to hummingbirds. Flowers are replaced with long seed pods, and the evergreen leaves turn reddish-purple for late autumn and winter color.

You can use a host of vines to accent architectural lines, fill in empty spaces, or mask unpleasant structural features, but using native vines will invite the natural community to your yard, while still offering a rich pallette of color, fragrance, and texture. For more information and plant lists, look for the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's handbook on *Flowering Vines* (http://bbg.org/), and Allen Lacy's classic work: *Gardening with Groundcovers and Vines*.

The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit **www.greenmanshow.com.**

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